

Companioning directees in apophatic (wordless and imageless) prayer

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Introduction

‘...if we invite God with attention, opening [our] inner spaces with silence, He will speak to our souls, not with words or concepts, but in the mysterious way that Love expresses itself – by presence’. - M. Basil Pennington¹

Much of our communication with God happens via language, image, feeling, in a linear progression of thoughts, as this is how we predominantly experience human consciousness. Yet, throughout the centuries Christians also speak about a form of prayer that happens in total silence - a silent presence with God. This paper looks at what happens when finite human beings contemplate the infinite, boundless God in silence, unmediated by words or images. Most authors writing in this area of apophatic ways of praying, at some point, urge the person to seek out a Spiritual Director as an important part of their growth.² I wonder, what might Christians have learned of this kind of being with God, and what might spiritual directors have learned about companioning people in silence?

Barry and Connolly define Christian spiritual direction as ‘help given by one Christian to another which enables that person to pay attention to God’s personal communication to him or her, to respond to this personally communicating God, to grow in intimacy with this God, and to live out the consequences of that relationship’.³ Where prayer is *kataphatic* in nature (lit. ‘towards speech’), communication happens through visual and oral means: words, images, Scripture, art, poetry, movement, dance, metaphor and feelings.⁴ In *apophatic* prayer (lit. ‘away or apart from speech’),⁵ there is an absence of these things, that might be conveyed as a simple beholding or being with God. What is the nature of communication between God and the directee in this situation? For the purposes of this paper, I make the assumption that there *is* communication, a ‘speaking to our souls in silence’⁶; or perhaps better-termed, *a loving*, that happens between God and the directee. There is a common thread across the literature that when people meet with God in silence without words or images, we are invited to just be, to let go in the presence of God.⁷

¹ M. Basil Pennington, *Centered Living* (New York: Doubleday, 1986), cited in Ruth Hayley Barton, *Invitation to Silence and Solitude* (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 2010), Ch.2.

² Gerald May, *Care of Mind/Care of Spirit: A Psychiatrist Explores Spiritual Direction* (New York: HarperCollins, 1992), p.13.

³ William A. Barry & William J. Connolly, *The Practice of Spiritual Direction* (New York: HarperCollins, 2009), p.8.

⁴ J P Williams, *Seeking the God Beyond: A Beginner’s Guide to Christian Apophatic Spirituality* (London: SCM Press, 2018), p.xviii.

⁵ Williams, *Seeking the God Beyond*.

⁶ Pennington, *Centered Living*, cited in Ruth Hayley Barton, *Invitation to Silence and Solitude*, Ch.2.

⁷ It is noticing the deep yearning for this place of being utterly stilled, emptied before God, that kindled my own interest in this topic.

This paper poses six questions about how directors might grow in their practice of companioning directees in apophatic prayer. These questions have arisen as central themes from a literature search and three interviews with experienced spiritual directors.⁸ They are questions about how might we notice beginnings, how kataphatic and apophatic prayer relate, the director's posture, what contrasts there might be to working with kataphatic words and images, how might we companion people in the spiritual dynamics of surrender, how we pace the work.

At the outset of this topic, I want to headline three things: firstly, that as I embarked on this project I noticed a body of literature on apophatic prayer, but little written on the subject of spiritual direction in relation to it. I then realised with significant trepidation my naïve bluster: a newbie spiritual director trying to understand how one could presume to assist in welcoming the presence of sheer mystery. As ever, the foundational premise of our spiritual direction practice that *the Holy Spirit is the director* is our bedrock here. We have a role as companion, as witness, as one who voices permission to be in new ways with God. We welcome mystery.

Secondly, that each spiritual director and author I encountered noted a potential temptation to elevate apophatic prayer as somehow more 'advanced' than kataphatic ways of praying, but all rejected this as an entirely false hierarchy. To quote one experienced spiritual director 'it is simply "both/and"'. As we will explore, our framing is to welcome the appropriate gift for now, not to impose human notions of progress on the revelation of God. This paper wonders how directors can best companion directees when silence is God's appropriate gift for this person.

Thirdly, I have not attempted to detail apophatic prayer practices, such as centring prayer or apophatic texts as this is done extensively elsewhere. Resources for those interested are listed in the Appendix.

1. How might apophatic prayer begin? Noticing the yearning for the God beyond language

'If you understand it, it is not God'.⁹ This often-quoted dictum of St Augustine of Hippo touches on a fundamental quality of human beings' aspirations to know and be known by God: the paradox that we can both know God richly, but at the same time not have even begun to know God. God is 'not just beyond our language, but our minds'; our words are

⁸ I want to warmly thank the spiritual directors who so generously gave me their time and thoughts for this not-so-straightforward topic.

⁹Augustine of Hippo, *Sermon 52*, 16.

more like gestures that point our attention in the right direction.¹⁰ Indescribable, ineffable, the beginning and end, God is inside and outside of time. God, isn't a 'it of reality', but 'the source of the whole thing. So it is not surprising that words don't quite work properly when it comes to God'.¹¹

Some people relate that apophatic prayer begins with noticing a deep desire for God beyond words.¹² One experienced spiritual director I interviewed, Margaret,¹³ described this as coming to know her deepest yearning for God, met in silence and stillness. The beginnings of apophatic silence started as a 'deeper hunger to sit with that which I couldn't know, the unknown, uncertainty - with mystery, and for that to just be enough'. It could be said that *apophatic* prayer is making friends with a kind of yearning that reaches beyond some of our natural human limits and even into the darkness pre-Creation (Gen 1:2). Margaret explained that many directees feel incredibly alone in this kind of prayer and greatly appreciate companionship and resources to support them. This is especially true in a country such as New Zealand where the communities of people interested in contemplation are small in number, particularly outside of the major cities. Spiritual directors have an important role to welcome, with directees, their deep yearning; recognising they may be the only person the directee has ever talked to about this.

2. If it's a case of welcoming *both* apophatic *and* kataphatic expressions of prayer, what's a good way to frame this?: 'What is the appropriate gift for now?'

One of the initial questions which might come up for directees or directors is how wordless or imageless prayer sits alongside kataphatic ways of praying. Gerard May explains that most people begin on a Christian journey with a kataphatic orientation, seeking a sensate assurance of their relationship with the divine.¹⁴ Notwithstanding this, some spiritual paths and organisations (eg. Quakers) emphasise a primarily apophatic spirituality. Experienced spiritual director Margaret says that approximately 20% of her thirty directees talk about their prayer having an apophatic dimension. She explains that 'in a spiritual direction room, when what is conveyed is that a person is at a crossroads, or questioning how things currently look, that is where a wordless or imageless prayer might arise'. Regular themes that come up are emptiness or uncertainty.

Gerald May emphasises the need for directors to be aware of what he terms an apophatic or kataphatic bias in their own spiritual orientation, directors should have a deep

¹⁰JP Williams, *Seeking the God Beyond*, xiv.

¹¹*Ibid*, xv.

¹² Ruth Hayley Barton, *Invitation to Solitude and Silence*, Ch 2.

¹³ Not her real name.

¹⁴May, *Care of Mind/Care of Spirit*, p.12.

appreciation for the gifts and potential temptations of both forms of spirituality.¹⁵ An extreme development of the kataphatic approach could lead to an obsession with words, imagery or thought, that begins to obscure God, the source of those thoughts. Alternatively, an apophatic extremism can produce ‘anti-incarnational distortions’.¹⁶ One fear of many Christian leaders is that apophatic forms of spirituality may lead people out of the church.¹⁷ Gerald May challenges directors who very strongly reside in one form of kataphatic or apophatic prayer themselves to examine whether they can adequately companion someone who is strongly located in the other: his own view is that a person with a solely kataphatic approach cannot provide appropriate apophatic guidance.¹⁸

The spiritual directors I interviewed did not express May’s view. Their focus was on a director’s freedom to allow the directee to ‘come home’, to find a place of God’s dwelling within their life. For a directee exploring wordless and imageless prayer, this means finding home in a place that might have different, disorienting dimensions to what they have experienced before and a home that could look different to that which their director may inhabit with God. But the important thing was being able to be *home* there. All felt a false hierarchy can be established between these dimensions of prayer. Director Margaret strongly emphasised both kataphatic and apophatic dimensions tend to exist side by side. She offered a framework in which directors might helpfully sit with the question ‘what is the gift of God that is appropriate, for this directee, now?’. While I would personally challenge the absolutism of May’s view above, it raises an important consideration for directors: am I free to welcome this appropriate gift? Am I biased towards or away from certain gifts to some extent?

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ Cynthia Bourgeault, ‘Cracking the Cloud, Part 1’. Audio recording of proceedings of The Heart of Centering Prayer – Contemplative Outreach South Africa National Conference 2018, accessed 15 July 2020, www.soundcloud.com/cacadmin/sets/the-heart-of-centering-prayer. Bourgeault counters that apophatic spirituality is a gift to congregational churches and, in her experience of teaching centering prayer over the years, people tend to find depths in worship they haven’t experienced before – ‘there is less restless boredom!’.

¹⁸ May, *Care of Mind/Care of Spirit*, p.12.

3. What posture(s) might I inhabit as a director? Being friends with silence and unknowing – listening from our heart space

Mary Ebyarimpa in her exploration of spiritual direction and silence, believes that directors need to be ‘friends of silence’; silence needs to be ‘emptying us and filling us’.¹⁹ Silence ‘teaches us to speak’:²⁰ the words directors offer to others from silence are those that come from encounter with God, they bring life to others, they speak truth and freedom. One experienced director I interviewed, Jo²¹, emphasised we can learn to listen and speak from silence. She challenged the temptation to listen or speak from ‘our top two inches’ (a cognition-centric listening), but that listening in silence is something she knows resides in her heart, at the ‘centre of her being’. The concept from te Ao Māori, *noho puku*, has shaped her. *Noho puku* means ‘to stay silent or fast’, literally the *stomach resting* and it is this place where the *welcome* of God is encountered.

Where we listen from is important for many writers on apophatic spirituality; many affirm the teaching of the desert Fathers and Mothers who speak of the heart as the organ of spiritual perception; that our task is ‘putting the mind in the heart’.²² A fulsome consideration of this topic is beyond our present scope, but exploration of how our spiritual faculties operate is an important area for directors. The head and the heart are often pitted against each other in Western paradigms, and the ‘heart’ is reduced to a concept of affective perception.²³ Bourgeault suggests that the self-conscious mind runs like a computer programme, in a bounded mode of ‘self’ – judging, separating, analysing, evaluating. It is about ‘perception through differentiation’ – ‘who am I’ as different from everyone else.²⁴ With the mind in the heart, our spiritual faculties run an entirely different programme, where we don’t focus on refining our own ego-functioning, but consent simply to be the self, derived from God, in ‘the cloud of unknowing’, a place beyond space and time.²⁵ Contemplation, she writes, is a ‘feelingful beholding’, beyond the limits of the reactive ego-self, allowing a unity with the divine heart, rather than focusing on a single

¹⁹ Mary Ebyarimpa, ‘Living Silence’, accessed 29 September 2020, www.sgm.org.nz/uploads/2/0/1/6/20165561/living_silence_mary_ebyarimpa.pdf

²⁰ H. Nouwen, *The Way of the Heart*, (New York: Ballantine Books, 1983), p.46.

²¹ Not her real name.

²² See Cynthia Bourgeault, *The Heart of Centering Prayer* (Boulder, Colorado: Shambhala Publications, Inc, 2014) and Thomas Keating, *Intimacy with God: An Introduction to Centering Prayer* (Snowmass, Colorado: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 2009), for a good discussion of this.

²³ Cynthia Bourgeault, ‘Attention of the Heart’. Audio recording of proceedings of The Heart of Centering Prayer – Contemplative Outreach South Africa National Conference 2018, accessed 15 July 2020, www.soundcloud.com/cacadmin/sets/the-heart-of-centering-prayer.

²⁴ Bourgeault, ‘Cracking the Code Part 1’. She explains these are ‘all the characteristics we spend our lives journaling about’.

²⁵ Centering into the Cloud Cynthia Bourgeault, ‘Centering into the Cloud’. Audio recording of proceedings of The Heart of Centering Prayer – Contemplative Outreach South Africa National Conference 2018, accessed 15 July 2020, www.soundcloud.com/cacadmin/sets/the-heart-of-centering-prayer.

object to the exclusion of others.²⁶ She explains that the self-conscious mind then takes this ‘feelingfulness’ and translates it into forward motion that operates beyond the old programme of perception through differentiation.²⁷ This might sound complex for the spiritual direction room, but perhaps it raises an important question for directors: how attached are we to the *perception through differentiation* system?

Spiritual director Margaret explained that spiritual direction is a space of giving permission. Directees are usually reasonably cautious about stepping into new territory and directors have an important role in giving permission to explore new gifts. For those noticing a hunger to encounter God in apophatic prayer, she believes this permission is important: it includes permission to be in silence together, permission to not know something, to be simply waiting, not to be seeking ‘progress’, for the disorienting or uncomfortable aspects of mystery. The director can give the directee permission to be in these places through things they say explicitly. She should also ensure she does not exclude these implicitly if she experiences discomfort about these things. Sue Pickering recommends directors reflect on our ‘silence’ history.²⁸ A set of questions for reflection are included in the Appendix.

4. What might be different to spiritual direction working with words and images?

Welcoming the nonlinear and disorientating – focusing on the relational dimensions

Where directees feel the need to be polite, they might worry that conversation about apophatic prayer might be disorientating or undermine a director’s command of the conversation, so they are reluctant to bring it. Silence is a powerful place,²⁹ some directees may fear a loss of bearings arising in deep silence. Spiritual Director Margaret noted the director’s role is to remind directees of their grounding in God’s love as they encounter new spaces of silence.

4.1 Non-linear ‘direction’

Within Scripture there are two words used to encompass time: *chronos* (from which we get the word ‘chronological’) and *kairos*³⁰, which denotes moments when God’s immortal, eschatological presence is encountered in human reality, a dimension not marked by chronological categories of past, present and future.³¹ Apophatic theologies emphasise the non-temporal nature of God, beyond the understanding of mortal creatures bound by

²⁶ Bourgeault, ‘Attention of the Heart’.

²⁷ Bourgeault, *Ibid*.

²⁸ Sue Pickering, *Spiritual Direction: A Practical Introduction* (London: Canterbury Press, 2008), p.107.

²⁹ Kenneth Leech, *Soul Friend, A Study of Spirituality*, (London: Sheldon Press, 1977), p.179.

³⁰ See Mark 1:15 and Titus 1:3 for examples.

³¹ ‘Living a Kairos Life in a Chronos World’, accessed 2 October, 2020, www.theologyofwork.org/the-high-calling/blog/living-kairos-life-chronos-world.

directional time.³² Companioning people in wordless and imageless prayer, directors might notice the ways in which we talk about our chronological experience of time and any ways this might preclude exploration of a non-linear presence with God. As William Shannon explains, 'wordless prayer is not an effort to "get anywhere" for we are actually already there in God's presence. It's just that we are not sufficiently conscious of our being there'.³³ There might not be 'forwards', or 'progress', or a sense of a distinct direction in the way we grow. Directors can help directees to notice what it means to 'be' *simultaneously* in chronological time and in God's kairos dimension beyond it.³⁴

4.2 Welcoming that which might be disorientating

Some directees talk about their encounter with God in a way that could be somewhat disorienting, either spatially or temporally.³⁵ It can be tempting to want to delineate the edges of the experience. For example, can we welcome someone 'in freefall' without needing to know where they will land? If a directee talks about 'hunger', 'love', 'light' or 'emptiness'... we might normally want to mine the intricacies of this thing. However, using the physical senses to navigate this territory ceases to be relevant where what is happening is a presence of the heart with God not using the usual means of sensate perception.

4.3 Suspending a subject-object orientation

Language and image, symbol and metaphor are by their very nature subject-object orientated. A wonderfully helpful image offered in the SGM Spiritual Directors' Formation Programme is that of a director and directee together holding up a moment of the directee's religious experience as you would suspend an artwork in the centre of a room and then, carefully, mutually, and lovingly circling around it together noticing all the contours,

³² Maggie Ross, *Silence: A User's Guide, Vol. 1: Process* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd Ltd, 2014), p.37.

³³ William Shannon, *Silence on Fire*, as cited in Barton, *An Invitation to Silence and Solitude*, Ch.2.

³⁴ Director Margaret encourages those working with directees exploring apophatic ways of praying to 'trust the very slow work and pace'. She finds a helpful concept is that of Holy Saturday, a waiting time between the Crucifixion of Good Friday and the Resurrection on Easter Sunday. Margaret suggests that we experience much of the spiritual life as a Holy Saturday. Directors might be aware of being able to talk about our experience of time and how the language we use might orientate us towards chronological time or Kairos time.

³⁵ These descriptions have come from interviews with Spiritual Directors, or are metaphors used in the literature. How might we as directors respond to some of these descriptions of silence?

- 'It was like I was looking out and then it went 360 degrees or like spherical in every direction, but not even looking anymore'.
- 'I stand at an event horizon [on the edge of a black hole], the laws of time and space cease, and then nothing'.
- 'There is emptiness. And love'.
- 'Freefall, always now freefall'.
- 'Hunger, just all encompassing, aching hunger'.
- 'I sense I might be consumed by holiness'.
- '=It is darkness, silence, not scary. Nothing but everything'.

shadows and nuances of this communication with God.³⁶ The art installation metaphor suggests we might circumnavigate the boundaries of the material, or metaphorically pick it up and hold it, interact with it, or approach the material from a different angle to see it in a new light.

What happens though where there is not language or image involved in the prayer? In this situation where a directee is exploring what it means to simply *be* in relation to God, to behold our Creator in silence, the human agency and exploration involved in the art installation metaphor may become problematic. There might be less of a need to circumnavigate, or dive into the sensory details, but instead to explore a directee's identity in relation to this encounter (see below).

5. Are there any common themes that come up? Letting go: 'desiring nothing'

The foundation of all prayer is the knowledge that God is with us, and comes to dwell with us. We are participants, not masters in prayer.³⁷ A common theme which runs through large amounts of writing on apophatic prayer, is self-discovery (becoming aware of who I am in relation to God) and as a result, self-surrender.³⁸ In this encounter, we are met with the invitation of the Lord in Psalm 46, to 'be still and know I am God'. God's command to 'be still' translates from the stem of the Hebrew verb *rapha* which means to 'let go, release our grip, hang limp, sink down'.³⁹ We release, or *God* allows us to release, our grip on our agency, so that we might intimately know Him.⁴⁰ Spiritual Director Jo talked about letting go as a gift that is given by God, in His timing. Her experience was that she couldn't make this happen, God allowed her to relax her grip.⁴¹

There is a paradox in surrendering to God in this way: we commit our intention⁴² to times of contemplation, but receive it wholly as a gift, 'infused' by God's grace.⁴³ St John of the Cross explains the temptation that we can become attached to spiritual growth: that as the soul draws closer to God we enjoy 'the sweet things of earth and heaven, such as joy,

³⁶Spiritual Growth Ministries, Working with Religious Experience, workshop material, 2019.

³⁷ May, *Care of Mind/Care of Spirit*, p.12.

³⁸ Leech, *Soul Friend*, p.186

³⁹John J. Parsons, 'Be Still and Know that I am God', accessed 27 September 2020, www.hebrew4christians.com/Meditations/Be_Still/be_still.html. Leon Bloder, 'Rapha & Yada - "Be Still & Know": Reimagined', accessed 29 September 2020, www.presbymusings.com/2019/06/rapha-yada-be-still-know-reimagined.html.

⁴⁰ This is Jesus' practice of *kenosis*, the act of self-emptying described Philippians 2:7; His own will was released to become entirely receptive to God's will.

⁴¹ Spiritual Director Margaret commented she has noticed that this experience in prayer of letting go with God, sometimes is associated with a subsequent invitation to pick something new up in life.

⁴² Bourgeault, *The Heart of Centering Prayer*, p.27.

⁴³ May, *Care of Mind/Care of Spirit*, p.36.

consolation and knowledge'. But the problem is that they 'stop short of the summit, the goods they offer are truly good, but these stir up desire in us, and now we seek God no longer for Godself, but for ourselves'.⁴⁴ He taught that only stripping ourselves of 'such baggage, all such desires to gain something, desiring nothing' is where we find 'the summit of glory'.⁴⁵ It is tempting to want to master a practice of Centering Prayer,⁴⁶ or to want to 'consume' silence as an experience.⁴⁷ This maintains our agency, our will. We cannot analyse or control our spiritual experience, but simply respond to it.⁴⁸

Being still, releasing our grip involves dying to our own agency.⁴⁹ Gerald May asserts that there is an unconscious part of us that does not like dying to ourselves which will start to 'complain'.⁵⁰ He explains that on the surface of a directee's conscious attention, they may report feeling at peace. However, at a deeper level there is a fear of loss, which can manifest as a fear of being alone, being in a void or losing control.⁵¹ Our soul will start to tell us it is time to get back in the driver's seat. A spiritual director's role is to aid the work of the Spirit in clearing away the 'obstacles' in the soul to then freely surrender to God.⁵² This is gentle and slow work. Ruth Hayley Barton suggests that in the crucible of silence we run up against our human limits, our inability to understand God and to let go of our wills. She encourages us to dwell here, and in doing so to learn that this is not a place to 'feel skewered by our human impotence but instead [this place] becomes the very breast of God'.⁵³ For directees to be companioned in this process is important. How do we as directors feel about 'dying to self'? What effect does this have on us or talking about it on us?

6. What might I be attending to in sessions with this person? The wisdom of the midwife, noticing the push to words.

Maggie Ross describes how there is a change in the perception that gradually occurs in silence in what she terms the 'deep mind', a silent consciousness beyond the chatter of self-conscious thought.⁵⁴ This 'transfigured' (differently configured) perceptive field, processes things in a liminal non-linear way with God and the 'self-conscious mind waits in unknowing to receive the gifts of transfigured perception'.⁵⁵ In short, people observe that silence 'does

⁴⁴ St John of the Cross, *The Ascent of Mt Carmel* 1.13.11, as cited in JP Williams, *Seeking the God Beyond* p. xvii.

⁴⁵ St John of the Cross, *The Ascent of Mt Carmel*.

⁴⁶ Bourgeault, 'Centering into the Cloud'.

⁴⁷ Ross, *Silence: A User's Guide*, p.19.

⁴⁸ May, *Care of Mind/Care of Spirit*, Ch.5

⁴⁹ See Luke, Chapter 9 and 14, and Galatians 2:20.

⁵⁰ May, *Care of Mind/Care of Spirit*, Ch.5.

⁵¹ *Ibid*.

⁵² Leech, *Soul Friend*, p.168.

⁵³ Barton, *Invitation to Silence and Solitude*, Ch.6.

⁵⁴ Ross, *Silence: A User's Guide*, p.37.

⁵⁵ Ross, *Ibid*, p.43.

something' or 'something happens', even though they can't analyse it, that 'gifts' of peace or loving perception then get noticed in some way.⁵⁶ One director, Anne⁵⁷, explained her sense that some of the work of silence can be 'forced to expression too early'. Employing Margaret Guenther's metaphor of the spiritual midwife,⁵⁸ she has a sense that directors can develop a knack for knowing when 'the push is coming' from silence into speech and this timing is important. There might be things, Anne believes, that need to 'wait in unknowing' for longer or stay in a place of unknowing.⁵⁹ Directors can gently wonder with directees whether this something they need to vocalise now or at all, or if it is a 'don't push yet' if it feels a bit early or unclear. Both directors and directees, like those in the birthing process, learn to observe and work with something they aren't in control of and need to have patience for the gift from God.

Conclusion

For directees exploring apophatic ways of praying, spiritual directors offer a significant role of companionship in mystery — welcoming directees' yearnings to meet God in unknowing and helping the directee to locate these expressions of prayer alongside other kataphatic practices of prayer. Directors who have a practice of silence, over time, learn to listen and direct *from* silence. We can give freedom for conversation in the direction room to unfold in ways that do not focus solely on sensate perception, offering a wonderful permission for directees sit with whatever is unclear, uncertain, unknown or nascent. We can give permission for non-linearity, and even some levels of disorientation. As we receive the gift of courage to release 'our grip' with God, we are ever-more freed to accompany directees into this encounter.

⁵⁶A directee of Margaret, "Kelly" in a recent session talked about how she has practised centring prayer and silent meditation for five years. Kelly's friend had commented that 'there's something about you I'm hungry for' and she knew this came out of the very still place of silence.

⁵⁷ Not her real name.

⁵⁸Margaret Guenther, *Holy Listening: the Art of Spiritual Direction*. (Cambridge, MA: Cowley Publications, 1992), p.

⁵⁹ This might be in the session itself, or Anne suggests, where creative processes might especially be employed in a direction session or outside of it so that more waiting can happen.

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Appendix

1. Resources for apophatic prayer practice: prayer of the heart

For those seeking resources to assist with exploring apophatic prayer practice further, many resources on the practice of centring prayer give a helpful starting point. A brief introduction can be found in Adele Ahlberg Calhoun's *Spiritual Disciplines Handbook: Practices That Transform Us* (Downer's Grove, Illinois: Intervarsity Press, 2015).

Thomas Keating and Cynthia Bourgeault have produced many written, audio and video resources on the practice, some of these include:

Thomas Keating

- *Intimacy with God: An Introduction to Centering Prayer* (2009)
- www.contemplativeoutreach.org/centering-prayer-method/

Cynthia Bourgeault

- *Centering Prayer and Inner Awakening* (2004)
- *The Heart of Centering Prayer* (2014)
- www.cynthiaborgeault.org/learn/signature-work/
Cynthia Bourgeault outlines her key teaching from 'The Heart of Centering Prayer' in a 13 session teaching given at Contemplative Outreach South Africa's National Conference. This includes a thorough discussion of *The Cloud of Unknowing*.

For those looking to find companionship in the journey a list of groups meeting in Aotearoa are available at www.contemplative.org.nz/groups/. Spiritual Growth Ministries provides a calendar of retreats and workshops happening in New Zealand, some of which have a focus on silence and Centering Prayer: www.sgm.org.nz/calendar-of-events.

For a general introduction to apophatic prayer see J. P. Williams's *Seeking the God Beyond: A Beginner's Guide to Christian Apophatic Spirituality* (London: SCM Press, 2018) and for a more devotional approach, Ruth Hayley Barton's *Invitation to Silence and Solitude* (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 2010).

2. Our 'Silence History': Reflection questions for spiritual directors on our response to silence and apophatic themes

- How do I feel about silence in sessions? How do I 'manage' silence in sessions? Am I comfortable with suggesting silence when it might be invited? How long could silence

extend? Does the director have the freedom to interrupt the flow of the session with me to suggest silence? Where are my own edges with silence?

- How do I sit with uncertainty? When things are uncertain in my life, how much of an impetus is there to achieve order or resolution? How comfortable am I with others' uncertainty?
- How do I sit with things not being complete, finished, or even very formed at all? How is waiting? Do I have a drive to differentiate and define? How do I relate to mystery at the moment?
- What is it like to be 'with the Spirit, in pitch black, who hovers over the waters' (Gen 1:2)? What feelings does unknowingness or emptiness raise in me? What feelings does 'a cloud of unknowing' elicit in me? What feelings does thinking about eternity or infinity elicit in me? Where fear or disorientation arise, can I welcome and sit with this?
- What feelings does an absence of sensory experience elicit in me?

3. Reflection questions for spiritual directors companioning those who encounter God in apophatic prayer, or for reflecting on their own experiences of apophatic prayer

- Is it helpful to use talk about your experiences of apophatic prayer (at the moment)? Are words that describe sensate perception (perceiving God with our senses) helpful for you to use right now?
- What has your experience of apophatic prayer been? How did it begin? What yearnings did you notice? What were your feelings in the early stages? As time progresses, what do you notice?
- What emotions surround these times of prayer?
- What posture do you find yourself in (physically, emotionally, spiritually)?
- From encountering God in wordless, imageless ways, what do you know about God? Apprehend or learn about God?
- Where do you experience silence in your body? How do experience silence spatially, and in terms of time?
- What effects do you notice silence/apophatic prayer has on your daily life? Your relationships? Motivations?
- What things do you notice more in your daily life?
- How do experience reading Scripture? Has apophatic prayer had any effect on this?
- How do you experience corporate worship times?
- How do you experience nature? How do you experience social or noisy environments?
- If both apophatic and kataphatic prayer are part of your prayer, how do these movements of prayer relate at the moment? How have they changed over time? How are they initiated in your life?
- Where is home for you at the moment?
- Did you, or do you, find yourself subconsciously leaning towards, or away from, apophatic prayer? Can you say anything more about this?
- Do you notice any fear/resistance arising from silence? What is this like?
- Do you feel safe in the silence?
- Do you experience the need for companionship in this journey? What opportunities do you have for companionship? What effect does it have?
- Is there a response you might like to make from silence? A physical gesture? A creative act? A relational gesture? Something else?